

September 15, 2003

Commissioners:

I've been an amateur radio operator for over 40 years and have held an extra class license for almost 30. In my opinion removal of the telegraphy requirement from Amateur Radio licensing is not in the public interest at this time. It is not in fact an impediment to acquiring a license so much as a necessary qualification according to the reasoning in the paper¹ by Andrew Ross, ZS1AN, which I had included in an earlier comment and include again with this submission for reference. His arguments apply as well to our country as they do to his.

I believe that since there is little or no practical reason for the elimination of the telegraphy requirement, these several petitions for its removal, and this one in particular, stem from another cause which can be well illustrated by the following story:

When they were side by side, the sentry put his mouth to his ear and said, "I think there's someone down there, Commander."

It didn't seem likely, but this was a battle-scarred veteran who'd spent ten years patrolling the Wall, not some fresh-faced kid who saw a bear in every bush.

Cautiously he wriggled forward till his head was over the edge and looked down.

He knew from memory that the rocky cliff fell sheer for at least eighty feet down to the tiny shingly cove, but now it was like looking into hellmouth, where Pyriphrethos's burning waves drive their phosphorescent crests deep into the darkness of woeful Acheron.

Nothing could live down there, nothing that still had dependence on light and air anyway, and he was moving back to give the sentry a tongue-lashing when suddenly the wind tore a huge hole in the cloud cover and a full moon lit up the scene like a thousand lanterns.

Now he saw, though he could hardly believe what he saw.

The waves had momentarily retreated to reveal the figure of a man crawling out of the sea. Then the gale sent its next wall of water rushing forward and the figure was buried beneath it. Impossible to survive, he thought. But when the sea receded, it was still there, hands and feet dug deep into the shingle. And in the few seconds of respite given by the withdrawing waters, the man scrambled forward another couple of feet before sinking his anchors once again.

Sometimes the suction of the retreating waves was too strong, or his anchorage was too shallow, and the recumbent body was drawn back the full length of its advance. But always when it seemed certain that the ocean must have driven deep into his lungs, or the razor-edged shingle must have ripped his naked chest wide open, the figure pushed itself forward once more.

"He'll never make it," said the sentry with utter assurance.

The guard commander watched a little while longer then said, "Six to four he does.

¹ www.qsl.net/zs1an/morse.htm

In gold."

The veteran looked down at the sea, which now seemed to be clutching at the body on the beach with a supernatural fury. It looked like a surefire bet, but he had a lot of respect for the commander's judgement.

"Silver," he compromised.

They settled to watch.

It took another half hour for the commander to win his bet, but finally the crawling man had dragged himself right up to the foot of the cliff where a couple of huge boulders resting on the beach formed a protective wall against which the sea dashed its mountainous missiles in vain. For a while he lay there, still immersed in water from time to time, but no longer at risk of being either beaten flat or dragged back into the depths. Then, just when the sentry was hoping he might claim victory in the bet by reason of the man's death, he sat upright.

"That sod must be made of bronze and bear hide," said the sentry with reluctant admiration. "What the fuck's he doing now?"

For the figure on the beach had pushed himself to his feet, and as the waters drew back, he emerged from his rocky refuge and to the observers' amazement began a kind of lumbering dance, following the receding waves, then backpedaling like mad as they drove forward once more. And all the while he was gesticulating, sometimes putting his left hand in the crook of his right elbow and thrusting his right fist into the air, sometimes putting both his thumbs into his mouth, then pulling them out with great force and stabbing his forefingers seaward, and shouting.

"I've seen that before," said the sentry. "That's what them bastards used to do under the Wall."

"Hush! I'm trying to hear what he's saying," said the commander.

As if in response, the wind fell for this moment and the sea drew back to its furthest point yet, still pursued by the dancing man whose shouts now drifted clearly up the cliff face.

"Up yours, old man!" he yelled. "Call yourself earthshaker? You couldn't shake your dick at a pisspot! So what are you going to do now, you watery old git? Ha ha! Right up yours!"

"You're right, he's a Greek," said the commander.

"Better still, he's a dead Greek," said the veteran with some satisfaction.

For in his growing boldness, the dancing man had allowed himself to be lured far away from his protective wall by this moment of comparative calm, so when the ocean suddenly exploded before him, he had no hope of getting back to safety. An avalanche of water far greater than anything before descended on him, driving him to the ground, then burying him deep. And at the same time the renewed fury of the wind sewed up the rent in the cloud and darkness fell.

"If he was talking to who I think he was talking to, he was a right idiot," said the sentry piously. "You gotta give the gods respect else they'll chew you up and spit you out."

The commander smiled.

"Let's see," he said.

They didn't have long to wait. As though the storm also wanted to look at the results of its latest onslaught, it tore aside the clouds once more.

"Well, by my bollocks and call me Zeus!" exclaimed the sentry, his recent piety completely forgotten.

There he was again, almost back where he'd started but still alive. Once more he started to struggle back over the beach. Only now as the waves retreated, they didn't leave any area of visible shingle, but a foot or so of water. This made the anchoring process much more difficult, but at the same time, by permitting the man to take a couple of swimming strokes with his muscular arms, it speeded his return to the safety of the boulders. Here he squatted, his head slumped on his broad chest, which rose and fell as he drew in great breaths of damp air.

"He's game," said the sentry grudgingly. "Got to give him that. But he's not out of trouble yet. How high do you reckon the tide comes in here, Commander?"

"Normally? I think it would just about reach the bottom of the cliff, a foot up at its highest. But this isn't normal. I don't know whether it's a very angry god or just very bad weather, but I'd say the way this wind's blowing the sea in, it will be thirty feet up the cliff face in an hour."

"So that really is it," said the sentry with some satisfaction.

"Not necessarily. He can climb."

"Up that rock face? Get on! It's smooth and it's sheer and there's an overhang at the top. I wouldn't fancy my chances there at my peak on a fine day, and that old bugger must be completely knackered."

"Double or quits on what you owe?" said the commander casually.

The sentry turned his head to look at the officer's profile, but it was as blank and unreadable as the cliff face, and not a lot more attractive either.

Then he looked down. The man was up to his knees in water already.

"Done," said the sentry.

Below, the Greek was examining the cliff face. His features were undiscernible through the heavy tangle of beard, but even at this distance they could see the eyes shining brightly in the reflection of the moonlight. He rubbed his hands vigorously against the remnants of his robe in what had to be a vain attempt to get them dry, then he reached up and began to climb.

He got about three feet above the water level before he lost his grip and slithered back down. Three more times he tried, three more times he fell. And each time he hit the water, it was higher than before.

"Looks like we're quits, Commander," said the sentry.

"Maybe."

"What's the silly old sod doing now?"

The silly old sod had removed his tattered robe, leaving himself stark naked, and he was tying it to form a rough sack, which he hung on a jag of rock protruding from one of the protective boulders. Next he knelt down in the water facing the boulder, took a deep breath, and plunged his head beneath the surface. When he emerged, he tossed what looked like a stone into the dangling sack. Again and again he did this.

"I know," said the sentry. "He's digging a tunnel."

He laughed raucously at his own wit till the guard commander said coldly, "Shut up. You might learn something."

The sentry stopped laughing. Shared hardship might relax the bonds of discipline slightly, but he and his comrades knew just how far they could go.

Finally the Greek stood upright once more, slung the sack around his neck, put both hands into it, then reached up the cliff face. He seemed to lean against it for a long moment, almost as if he were praying. Then he began to climb again.

The sentry waited for him to fall. But he didn't. From time to time he dipped into his sack, then reached up again in search of another handhold. As on the beach, progress was painfully slow, and occasionally one of his holds failed and he'd slip back a little, but still he kept coming.

"How in the name of Zeus is he doing that?" said the sentry. "It's just not possible."

"Mollusks," said the commander.

"No need to be like that, sir," said the sentry resentfully. "I was only asking."

"I said, mollusks. Clams, mussels, oysters, anything he could find. He's holding them against the wall till their suckers take ahold. Then he uses them as a ladder."

"Clams, you say?" Them things couldn't hold a man, surely?"

"Three might. He only moves one foot at a time. And he's using any holds he can find on the rock face too. He's a truly ingenious fellow."

The sentry shook his head in reluctant admiration. As if taking this as confirmation that their prey was close to escaping them, the waves hurled themselves with renewed force against the cliff, breaking over the climbing man and spraying flakes of spume over the watchers above.

A harsh grating noise reached them also.

"The bugger's laughing!" said the sentry.

"Of course, he's laughing. He wants the rock face to be as wet as possible. That's the way the mollusks like it. The wetter the surface, the tighter their grip."

The wind closed the gap in the clouds once more. This, coupled with the fact that the climber was now approaching the overhang, took him out of the watchers' sight. The sentry pushed himself back from the edge, squatted to his haunches and drew his sword.

"Let's see if he's still laughing when he sticks his head over the top and I cut his throat," he said, testing the metal's edge with his thumb.

The guard commander said nothing but squatted beside him. They had to lean into the wind to avoid being blown backward and from time to time their faces were lashed with salt water as the ocean rose to new heights of fury in its efforts to wash the climber free.

Minutes passed. The watchers didn't move. They had had years to learn that patience too is one of the great military arts.

Finally the sentry's face began to show his suspicion that the sea must after all have won its battle against the climbing Greek. He glanced at the guard commander. But his was a face as jagged and pocked as a city wall after a long siege, and quite unreadable at the best of times, so the sentry didn't risk speaking and returned to his watch.

A few moments later he was glad of his self-restraint. A new sound drifted up the cliff face amidst the lash of water and howl of wind. It was the noise of labored breathing, getting closer.

The sentry began to smile in happy anticipation. He decided not just to slit the

throat but to have a go at taking the whole head off. It would be fun to go back into the camp and toss it down among his half-waking comrades and say negligently, "Got myself another Greek while you idle sods were sleeping."

The breathing was loud now. The sentry moved his position so that he was right above it. An arm like a small tree trunk was swung up to rest on the edge of the cliff, and then a shag of salt-caked hair appeared, and finally the man's head came fully into view and a pair of deep-sunk intensely blue eyes took in the waiting men.

"How do, chuck," said the Greek.

The sentry rocked forward on his toes and shot out his left hand to grab the grizzled hair. But as quick as he moved, the Greek was quicker. His other hand came into view, grasping a large jagged clamshell. It snaked out almost faster than the eye could follow, and next moment the sentry's left wrist was slit through to the bone.

He fell backward, shrieking. His right hand released his sword as he grasped the gaping wound to stanch the spurting blood. The Greek dropped the shell and reached out to pick up the fallen weapon. Then a heavy-shod foot crashed down on his forearm and pinned it to the ground.

He looked up at the unreadable rugged face of the guard commander and smiled through his tangle of beard.

"Thanks, chuck," he said. "Saved me from a nasty fall."

"Kill the bastard, Commander," urged the ashen-faced sentry. "Chop his fucking arm right off!"

The commander was aware of the blue eyes fixed quizzically on his face as he debated the matter.

"Not yet," he said finally. "Not till we know if there are any more of his kind about.

Besides, the men need cheering up after what's happened recently, and I reckon a clever old Greek like this will take a long time dying."

"Long as you like, Captain," said the Greek. "I'm in no hurry, whatsoever. I'll take as long as ever you like."²

The prospective ham, for General Class license and above, faces three tests: radio theory, radio law, and Morse code; just as the Greek faced three tests: water, cliff, and men. The sentry lost some silver on the first two tests, but he lost some blood on the third, so he wanted the commander to toss back the Greek. Similarly, I believe some people attempting to get their licenses find the third test, telegraphy, particularly difficult, so they want the FCC to fall back to just the first two kinds.

There are two reasons why the commander decided to keep the Greek: safety ("Not till we know if there are any more of his kind about") and morale ("the men need cheering up after what's happened recently"). Similarly, there are two outstanding reasons

²Reginald Hill, Arms and the Women (New York: Delacorte Press, 1999) pp. 20ff.

why I believe you should keep the code requirement. Safety. In an emergency knowledge of code can be essential. And morale. What do you think will happen to the morale in the amateur ranks if suddenly there are two kinds of U.S. amateurs on HF, those with knowledge of CW, and those without? Many of us amateurs realize full well that the arguments for elimination of the requirement are specious.

Sincerely,
Earl S. Gosnell III